





Nothing excites the art world more than the prospect of a new faker unmasked. Reinhold Vasters was a faker of genius, and although his name has been known for some time, it is only now possible to gauge the extent of his activities. He was, in the author's words, 'working more in the tradition of Renaissance court goldsmiths than almost anyone I can think of'. Scraps of evidence brought together, the lucky find of a collection of partially annotated drawings, and a new Gorgon arises to turn dealers and collectors into stone.

# Reinhold Vasters – 'the last of the goldsmiths'?

Charles Truman

A note in the inventories of the Victoria and Albert Museum referring to a sixteenth-century German enamel relief from the Spitzer Collection reads 'Restored by Vasters. See photo with alternative setting shown by Murray Marks'.<sup>1</sup> The photograph has now disappeared but instead a collection of drawings for Renaissance-style goldsmith's work has come to light. These drawings show a large quantity of jewellery, silver and mounted crystals and indicate a workshop capable of large-scale production and restoration.

Little appears to be known about Reinhold Vasters, although the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Christie's, Murray Marks and Lazare Lowenstein were familiar enough with his work to refer to him by surname alone. We know from Marc Rosenberg,<sup>2</sup> who gives his working dates as 1853–1890, and more recently from Ernst Grimme,<sup>3</sup> that Vasters was employed as a restorer at the Aachen Cathedral treasury. Canon Bock<sup>4</sup> records that Vasters worked at the treasury in c. 1870, and a cross in the collection with his signature is cited by Rosenberg. It is worth noting here that a morse restored for the treasury at this time appears to be the model for a similar piece in the Spitzer Collection and another in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and that Spitzer himself was a benefactor of the Treasury.<sup>5</sup> In October 1909, a sale of Vasters' effects was held posthumously by Ant. Creutzer, formerly M. Lempertz, in Aachen. Among the items sold were twenty-three lots of modern goldsmith's work, possibly Vasters' own, and a collection of seven hundred and forty-three photographs and reproductions, mainly illustrating rock crystal, jewellery, enamels and silver. It is likely that it is this group which forms the core of the Museum's collection.

In November 1912, Murray Marks, the celebrated London dealer, sent to the Victoria and Albert Museum his collection of drawings by Vasters. The nine hundred and eighty drawings, mounted on one hundred and sixty boards, were described as being for 'jewellery, goldsmith's work, etc.' and were lent to the Museum for study purposes only. After examination, Edward Strange, Keeper of the Department of Engraving, Illustration and Design, noted that the drawings were 'of considerable interest, being executed with remarkable skill as designs for goldsmith's work, many pieces of which, I understand, have been placed on the market as old work. A few of the designs are genuine old 16th century Italian work; and it is curious to note how Vasters has developed the themes thus supplied to him into compositions of similar nature'.<sup>6</sup> Whether the drawings were ever

shown to the Keeper of Metalwork, W. W. Watts, is not recorded; in any case Strange advised the Director against their purchase, suggesting that they should be accepted as a gift if so offered. No such offer materialised and the drawings appeared some years later as part of Murray Marks' sale, described as 'A set of designs in paint, colour and pen and ink, representing cups, crucifixes, ecclesiastical ornaments, flagons, dishes in crystal, onyx, &c with designs of gold and enamel mountings for the same by Vosters [sic] and others – on cardboard, seven parcels'.<sup>7</sup> Lazare Lowenstein bought the collection for £37 16s 0d and presented it to the Museum in the following year.<sup>8</sup> The drawings had increased in number since Murray Marks had shown them to Strange; there were now one thousand and seventy-nine and they were accepted by the Museum with the hope that the donor would call in one day to give some information about them.

If the information was ever given, it has now been lost, and it is consequently often difficult to gauge the full extent of Vasters' work from the drawings alone. Over half are of mounted rock crystals or hard-stones and similarly grand *objets de luxe*. Drawings of jewellery and silver roughly divide the remainder with the total completed by a miscellany which includes some imitations of mediaeval *champlevé* enamels. Well over half of the total are carefully and precisely painted in the colours which had been used, or

*Above, left.*

1. Cup and cover, rock crystal mounted in enamelled gold, by Reinhold Vasters, Aachen, second half of the nineteenth century. *British Museum, London; Lee of Fareham Gift (1953, 2–1, 4).*

*Below, left.*

2. Design for a rock crystal cup and cover in the style of the sixteenth century by Reinhold Vasters. *Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 2688–1919).*

*Above and below centre.*

3 and 4. Designs for the mounts in enamelled gold by Vasters for No. 1 inscribed with instructions for the goldsmith. *Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 3439, 3441–4, 3446–1919).*

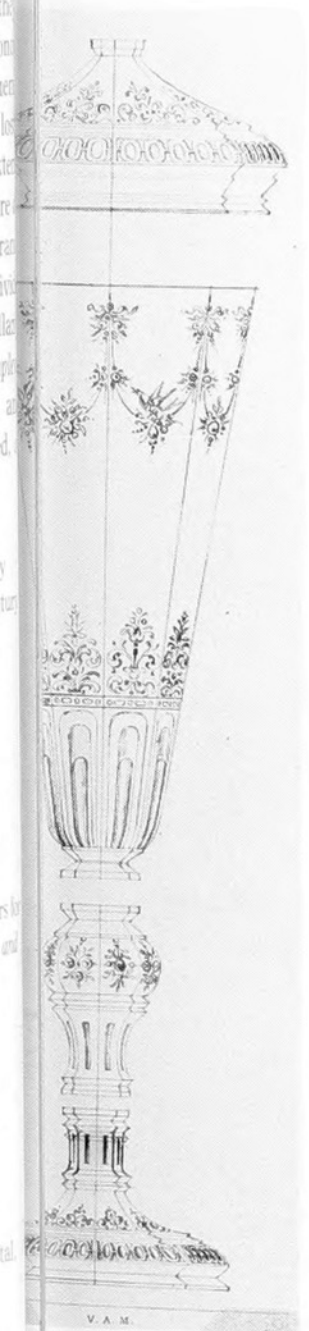
*Above, right.*

5. Cup and cover, rock crystal mounted in enamelled gold, by Vasters, Aachen, second half of the nineteenth century. *British Museum, London; Waddesdon Bequest (No. 77).*

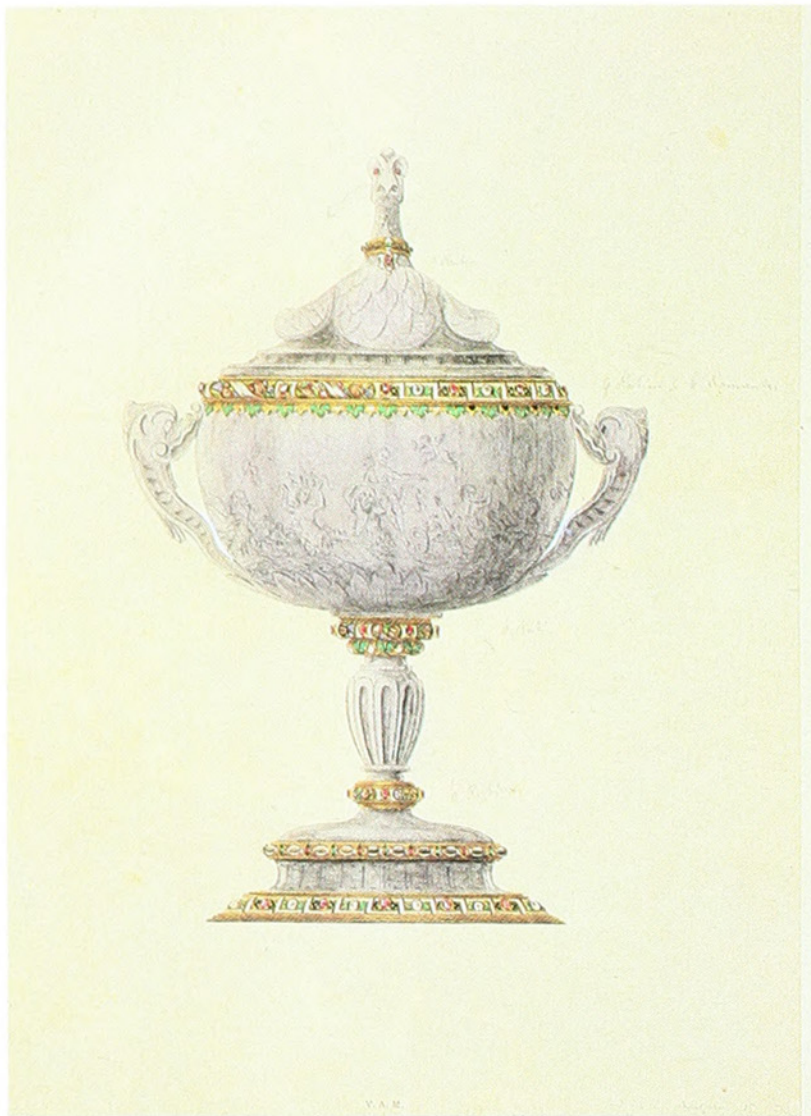
*Below, right.*

6. Cup and cover of rock crystal mounted in gold or gilt metal, probably German, sixteenth century, drawn by Vasters. *Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 2644–1919).*



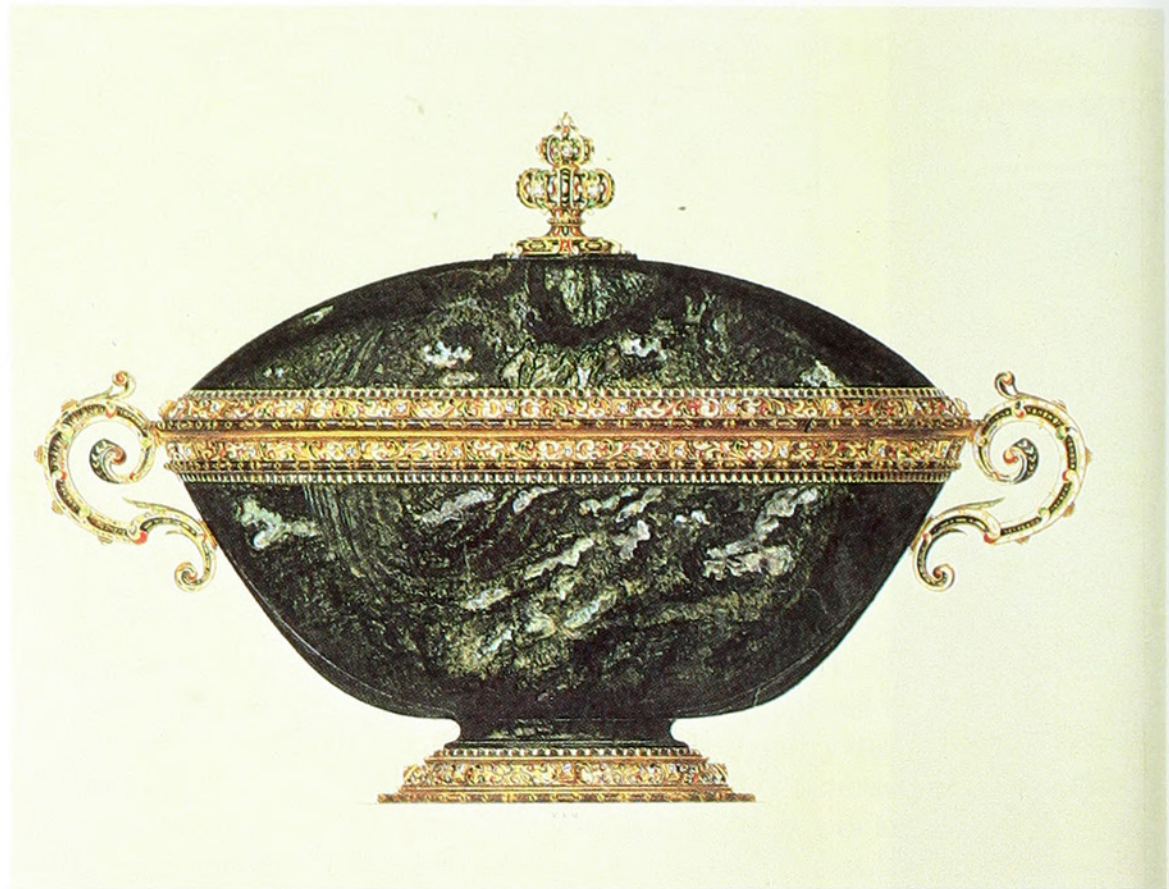






A. Design for a cup and cover in the style of the sixteenth century by Vasters. The goldsmith has given alternative designs for the rim of the bowl. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 2660-1919).

B. Design for agate bowl and cover in the Renaissance taste by Vasters. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 2599-1919).



C. Bowl and cover of agate mounted in enamelled gold by Vasters Aachen, second half of the nineteenth century. Private Collection, New York.



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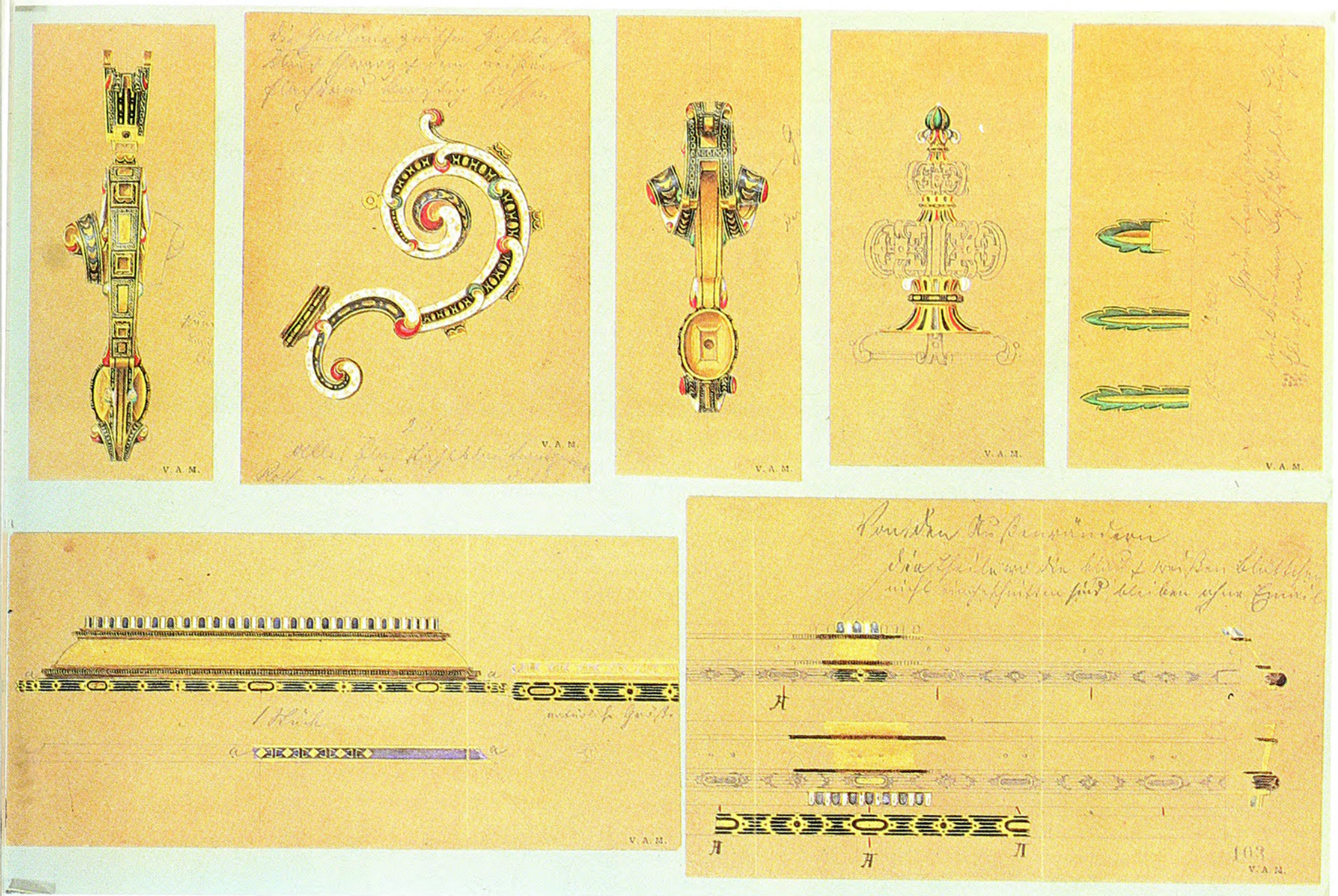
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D and E. Two sheets of drawing for the enamelled gold mounts on the bowl and cover in colour c by Vasters. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 2911-2927-1919).





were to be used, in the enamels, stones and goldsmith's work. In many instances the jeweller's task may have been simple restoration or cleaning, but in other cases, the detailed notes which accompany the drawings leave little doubt that the items were intended to be manufactured in the workshops. In one instance as many as thirty-two identical links were ordered, and mention of two, three or four pieces of the same design is not uncommon.

A connection with Frédéric Spitzer has been mentioned, and no less than twenty-one pieces from the Spitzer Collection appear in part or in whole in the Vasters drawings.<sup>9</sup> Ten of these are of jewels, the remainder are for grand rock crystals and other semi-precious stones mounted in enamelled gold, and watches. But Spitzer was not alone in acquiring works from Vasters, either as old works or in the knowledge that they were not. Other collections which contained pieces apparently by Vasters were that of Freiherr Karl von Rothschild,<sup>10</sup> and the Paris branch of the Rothschild family, which owned a house altar in ebony mounted in enamelled gold in the style of the Munich court goldsmiths of c. 1600 (Arturo Lopez-Wilshaw Collection, Sotheby's, 13 October 1970, lot 20) of which many drawings exist in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection. These last, incidentally, are the only drawings annotated in French.

Among the drawings is a series for a crystal cup and cover, described as '*Cristalchampagnerglas*'. The cup which was formerly in the Spitzer Collection is now in the collection of the Department of Mediaeval and Later Antiquities at the British Museum<sup>11</sup> where doubts were first raised about its authenticity in 1964 (No. 1). The tall flute is engraved on the wheel by a nineteenth-century hand imitating sixteenth-century work, and is illustrated by Vasters in an unmounted state, probably for his engraver to work from (No. 2). Two further sheets of drawings for the mounts carry instructions for the goldsmith (Nos. 3 and 4). It can be argued that notes such as these are as likely to be a record of existing work as an indication of new. In this instance Vasters has inscribed his drawing with instructions in German which give details of the enamelling and the background. One of these, referring to the rim of the lid, translates: 'This gold surface very thin but I think I can enamel this design into it', leaving no doubt that this area at least was to be newly decorated.<sup>12</sup> The inherent problems of refiring enamels makes it more than reasonable to suppose that the vessel is a complete product of Vasters' workshop.

Another rock crystal cup in the British Museum bears further witness to the goldsmith's inventiveness (No. 5). This piece, which came from Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild's collection at Waddesdon Manor,<sup>13</sup> would appear to have derived from a simpler sixteenth-century model (No. 6). The lid, which seems to be the only original element, is distinctively carved as a bird's head and neck, and the plain body of the earlier version is decorated with only a gold or gilt-metal rim set with pearls and with two mask handles. The base has similar simple mounts. A sheet in the Vasters collection shows a projected version of the piece (colour A). The neck of the exotic bird has acquired a collar of rubies set in enamelled gold. The new bowl has alternative designs for the left and the right hand sides of the rim, presumably for a client to approve before manufacture. The form of the stem has been preserved, but the upper and lower knops have again been set with rubies in enamelled gold *en suite* with the rim, and the foot has been cut in a similar style to the border of the lid. A further sheet of drawings shows the mounts for the finished cup separately, with instructions as to the numbers of each element required (No. 7). Possibly Vasters intended to produce the simpler version of the grander piece, but apart from being so contrary to the taste for 'improvement' of the last century, it is unlikely he would draw

alternative mounts for a piece which he was not intending to manufacture.

The series of grand *Schatzkammer* pieces includes a handsome agate bowl and cover (colour c). On the drawing of the whole (colour b), Vasters has pencilled in a line to suggest the recutting of the profile, a remodelling which appears to have been carried out. However, the mounts on the drawing are not identical to those very elaborate mounts on the piece itself. A further group of drawings shows the detailed studies for mounts which were eventually used by the goldsmith (colour d and e). This sumptuous piece is shortly to appear in a sale at Christie's, New York (28 March 1979), perhaps the first piece by Vasters to appear in a sale attributed to him.

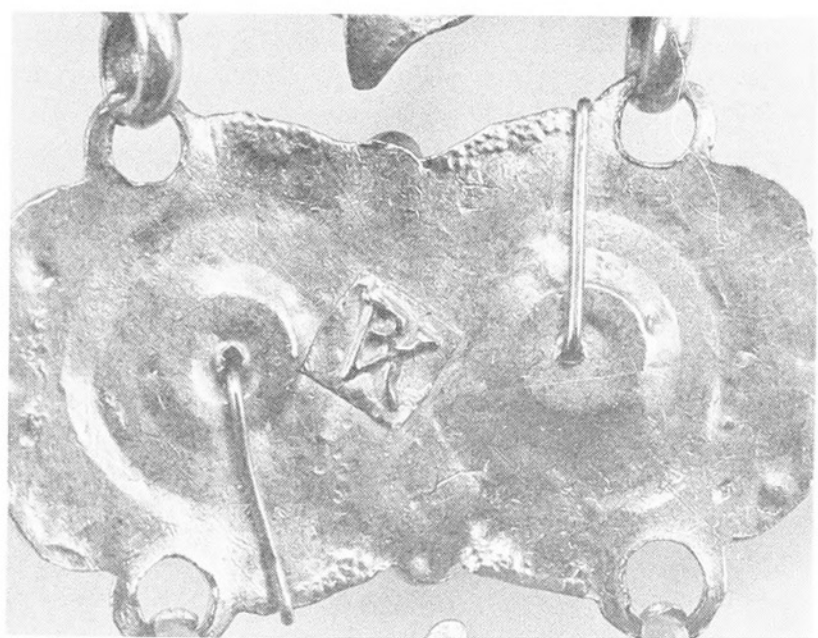
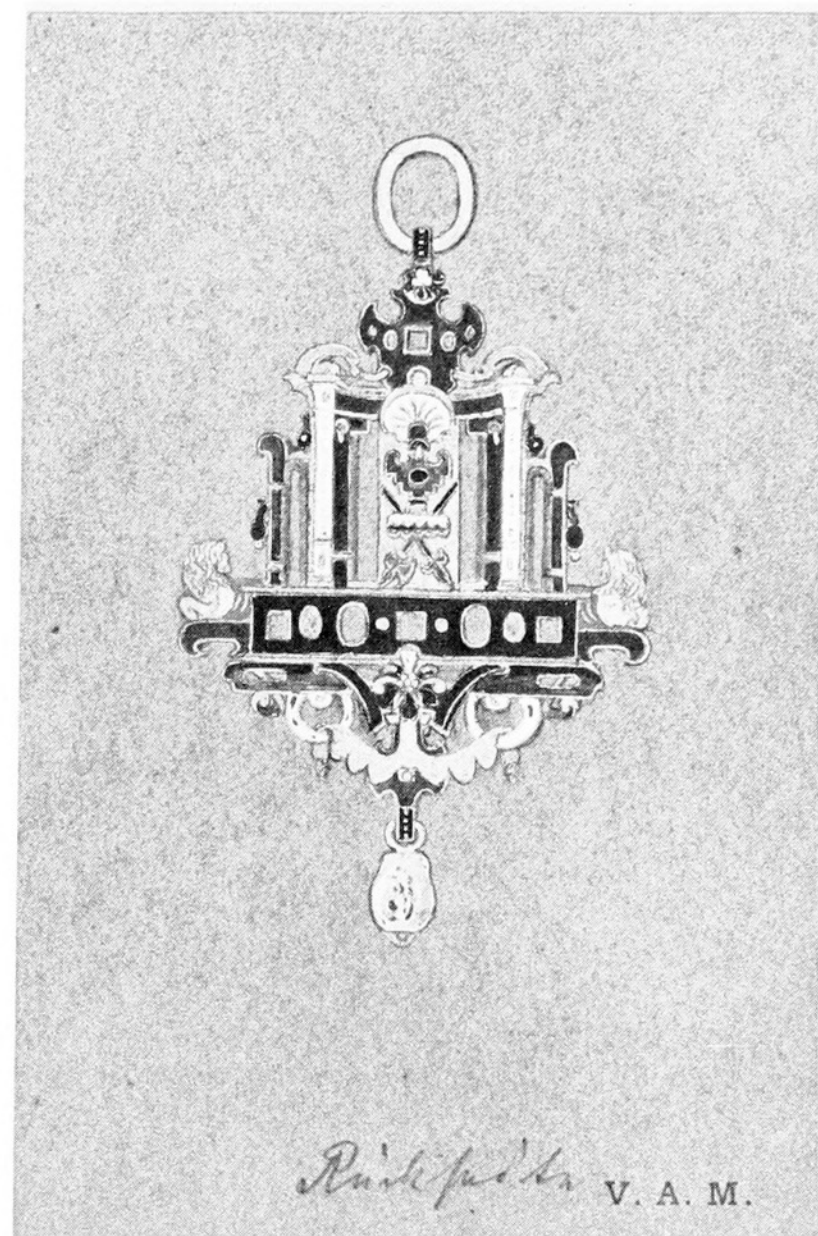
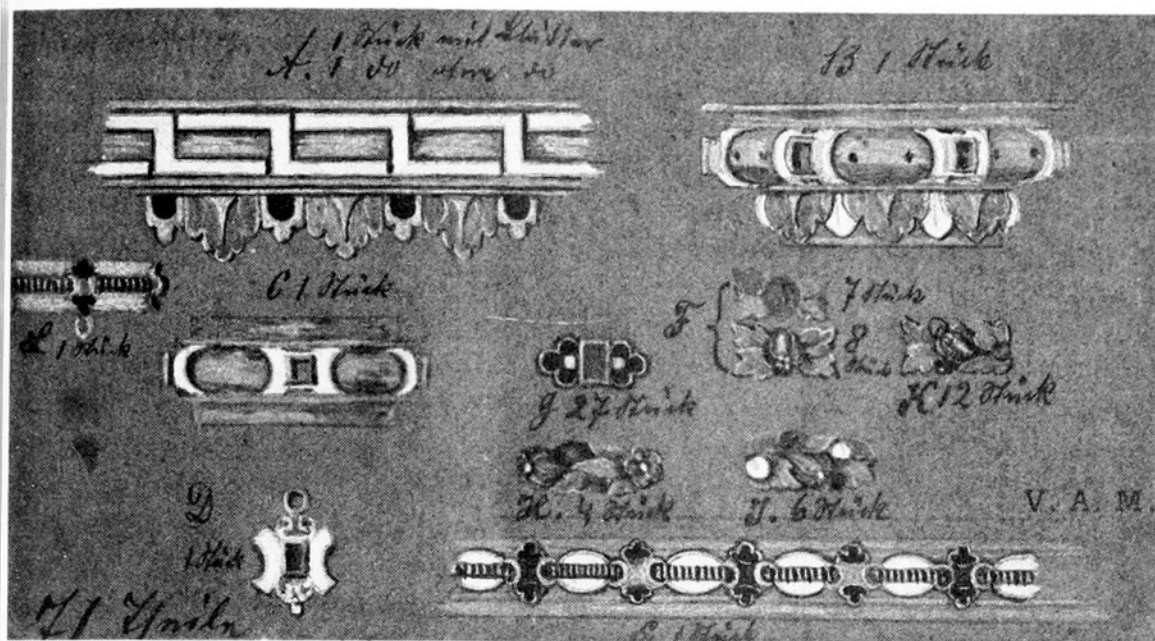
Less grand works did not escape Vasters' attention. A knife handle in the Victoria and Albert Museum,<sup>14</sup> also from the Spitzer Collection, and subsequently in that of George Salting, has undergone similar aggrandisement (No. 8). The amber handle cut in the form of a Roman emperor has acquired a helmet of enamelled gold and other jewelled embellishments. The knife in its new form (No. 9) is illustrated among the designs for jewellery together with detailed drawings of the mounts.

Vasters supplied three designs for a pendant in the style of the sixteenth century (colour f), formerly in the Spitzer Collection and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>15</sup> There are two drawings (colour g) for alternative schemes for the front of the jewel and another for the back (No. 10). The drawing, showing the jewel as it now is, has a figure of Charity flanked by Temperance and Prudence, but the alternative drawing replaces the central figure with a cross of brilliants. The figures are shown in outline only, whereas the rest of the jewel is carefully coloured. On the alternative design, Temperance and Prudence are also coloured, and it is possible that this difference in treatment may be because the central figure is an earlier sixteenth-century piece. Technically, assembling such a piece would present little problem since the figure is merely bolted to the main body of the jewel and it is quite likely that a goldsmith of Vasters' scope would have pieces such as this in his workshop kept for re-use at later dates. There are traces of decoration underneath the base of the figure which support this suggestion, but it has not yet been possible to determine scientifically any similarity or difference between the elements. A further group of jewels which might repay closer examination are those of enamelled gold dogs set on a jewelled scroll or cornucopia. A design for one of these, with alternative suspension units, is included in the Vasters drawings (colour g). Two very similar pieces were acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1870 from the treasury of the Virgin of the Pillar at Saragossa.<sup>16</sup> One of these may possibly be nineteenth century and two others appear in Spitzer's sale in 1893, lots 1842 and 1843. The appearance of four almost identical jewels at the same time is perhaps more than a coincidence. Unfortunately it has been impossible to locate the Spitzer examples to date.

A necklace in the Victoria and Albert Museum<sup>17</sup> is similar in style to some pieces in the Vasters drawings although it does not appear among them. It reputedly came from Schloss Ambras and the pendant attached to it appears to be of sixteenth-century manufacture. The links of the necklace have small gold labels soldered to them which bear a maker's mark which might be read as 'rv' in monogram (No. 11). This method of marking jewellery appears to be a particularly nineteenth-century characteristic and it is tempting to attribute the mark to Reinhold Vasters.

Vasters' designs for silver are generally less successful than those for jewellery or gold mounts. Several of the drawings are extravagantly Neo-gothic while others are in





Above, left.

7. Designs for the enamelled gold mounts cup and cover in No. 5, by Reinhold Vasters.

Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 3452-1919).

Far left.

8. Knife, with an amber handle mounted in enamelled gold. The mounts by Vasters, Aachen, second half of the nineteenth century. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (M. 621-1910).

Left.

9. Design for the knife handle shown in No. 8. Details of the gold mounts are also among the drawings. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 3003-1919).

Above, top.

10. Design for the back of the pendant shown in colour F by Vasters. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 2813-1919).

11. Maker's mark, 'RV' in monogram, on a nineteenth-century necklace, perhaps by Reinhold Vasters, Aachen.

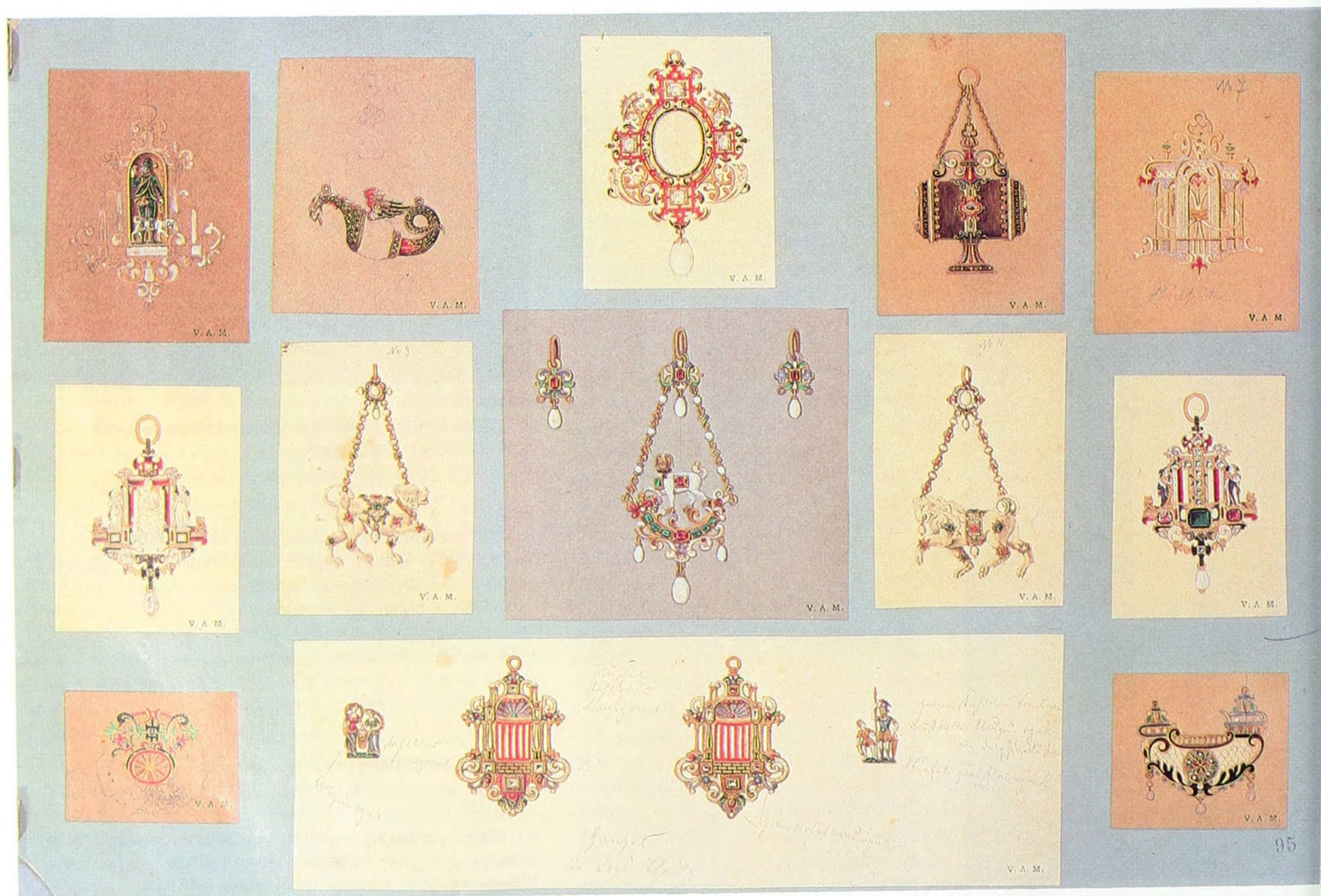
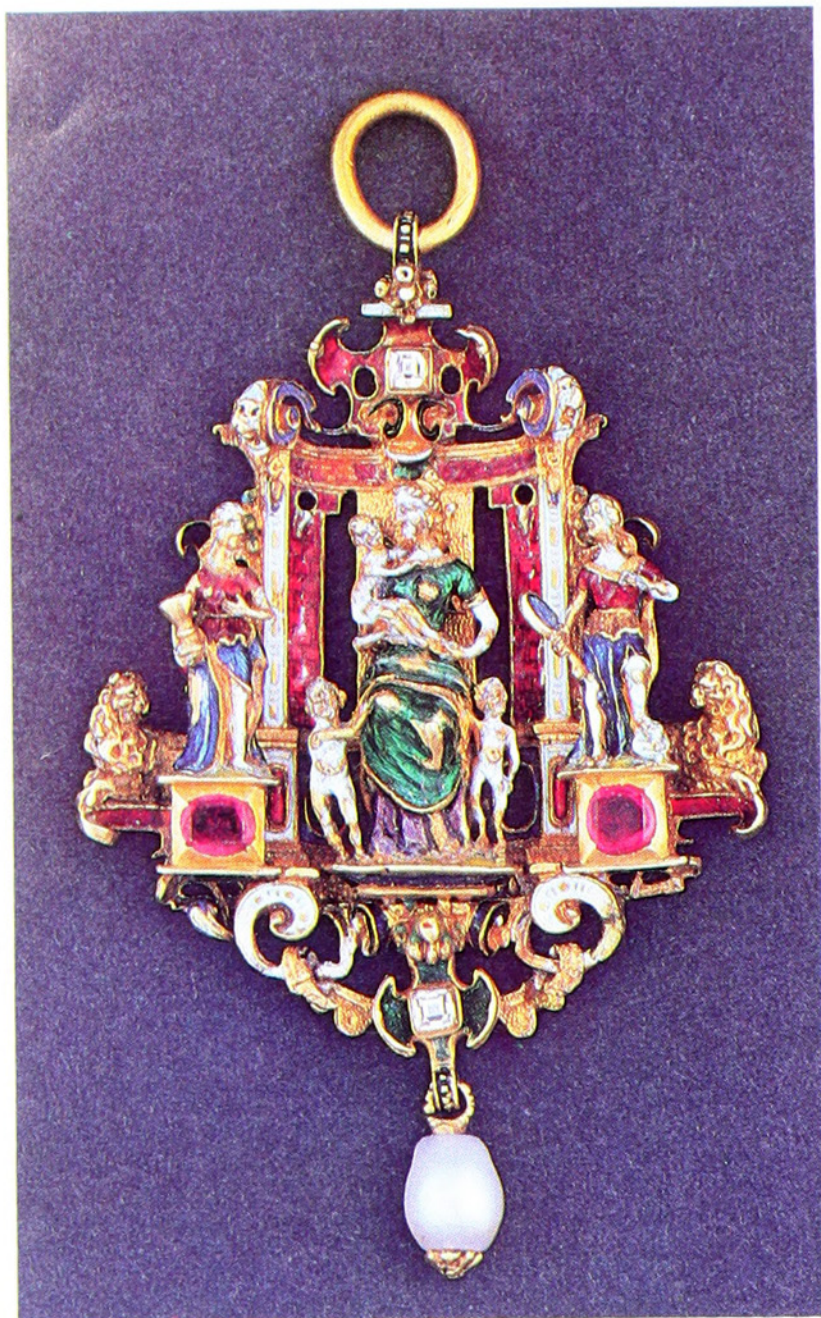
Victoria and Albert Museum, London (696-1868).



Fi and ii. Pendant of enamelled gold, in the style of the sixteenth century by Vasters, Aachen, second half of the nineteenth century. The central figure of *Charity* is probably earlier. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (M. 534-1910).

Below.

G. A page of designs for jewellery by Vasters. The pendant in colour F is shown on the left and right of the middle row. In the same row are Spitzer Collection, 1893, lots 1865, 1842 or 1843, and 1854, and the bottom row shows, in the centre, lot 1840 and, on the right, lot 1820, in an incomplete state. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 2836-2848-1919).





the style of 'tous les Louis'. This does not appear to have deterred his patrons and two large works appear in the catalogue of the Freiherr Karl von Rothschild collection for which full-size working drawings survive.<sup>18</sup> The first is a Gothic *tazza* supported by figures of Saints Jerome, Augustine, Gregory and Ambrose and surmounted by a group of Saint Hubert and the stag, and the second is a similarly Gothic drinking horn supported by fanciful beasts, towers and spires. More restrained is the design for a cup and cover (No. 12) which is the only drawing in the collection signed by Vasters.

From Strange's comments on the drawings in 1912, we may surmise that Vasters, or his clients were deliberately attempting to deceive collectors with some of the jewellery, silver and gold which he was manufacturing. This in itself does not condemn all the jewellery and crystals which appear in the drawings, although some of the instructions which accompany them strengthen the supposition that many are working drawings for fakes. What it does mean is that in the light of present knowledge those pieces which do occur in the Vasters collection should be treated with the utmost scepticism. It is hoped that this article may bring to light more pieces attributable to this extraordinary workshop and help to build a *corpus* worthy of one of the most skillful goldsmiths of the last century.

#### NOTES

1. No. M. 551-1910. The relief shows the appearance of Saint James at the battle of Clavijo. I am indebted to Claude Blair, Keeper of the Department of Metalwork, for drawing this note to my attention. See also Jörg Rasmussen 'Untersuchungen zum Halleschen Heilum des Kardinals Albrecht von Brandenburg', *Munchener Jahrbuch*, 1976, p. 106. I am grateful to Miss Anna Somers Cocks for showing me this article.
2. Marc Rosenberg, 'Der Goldschmiede Merkzeichen', Berlin, 1922-1928, Vol. 1, p. 12, No. 42.
3. Ernst Grimme, 'Der Aachener Domschatz', *Aachener Kunstblätter*, Band 42, 1972, pp. 4 and 5.
4. Ernst Grimme, *loc. cit.*
5. Grimme, *op. cit.*, No. 115. Collection Spitzer, Paris (P. Chevalier), 17 April - 16 June, 1893, Lot 350, v & a No. 394-1872.
6. Some of the 'designs' are coloured photographs but it has not been possible to trace the whereabouts of many of the pieces shown.
7. Christie's, 5 July 1918, Lot 17. Two of the drawings are signed H. Schneider and one T. Schmidt.
8. Museum numbers E. 2570 to 3649-1919.
9. The lot numbers are as follows (subsequent appearances are in parentheses): 1750, 1813, 1818 (Christie's, 28 November 1973, Lot 4), 1819, 1820 (Parke-Bernet, New York, 24 April 1969, Lot 96), 1838, 1840, 1842 or 1843, 1863, 1864, 1865, 2361, 2594, 2597, 2603, 2605, 2609, 2611, 2710, 2712, and 2759. I am grateful to Mr. J. F. Hayward for drawing a number of these, and other pieces, to my attention.
10. F. Luthmer, 'Der Schatz des Freiherren Karl von Rothschild', Frankfurt-am-Main, 1885, Tafel IV, v, VII and XLI.
11. 1953, 2-1, 4. Lee of Fareham Gift, *British Museum Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, 1953, pp. 88 ff. pl xxiv. I am grateful to Hugh Tait, Deputy Keeper of the Department of Mediaeval and Later Antiquities, for pointing out this cup to me. He had removed it from exhibition in 1964 as being of nineteenth-century manufacture.
12. Miss Vera Kaden of the National Art Library has been kind enough to transcribe and translate Vasters' almost illegible handwriting.
13. C. H. Read, 'The Waddesdon Bequest', 1902, No. 77.
14. M. 621-1910 (Salting Bequest) Spitzer, Lot 2361.
15. M. 534-1910 (Salting Bequest) Spitzer, Lot 1813.
16. 334-1870 and 336-1870.
17. 696-1868.
18. Luthmer, *loc. cit.*

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12. Design for a silver gilt cup and cover, signed 'R. Vasters', Aachen, second half of the nineteenth century. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (E. 2775-1919).